

**THE ROLE OF ISLAMIC SCHOLARS IN COUNTER-NARRATING
THE BOKO HARAM IDEOLOGICAL BASES**

BY

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BEING A PAPER PRESENTED AT

***International Conference on Insurgency and the Phenomenon of Boko
Haram in Nigeria***

ORGANISED BY

**Centre for Islamic Civilization and Interfaith Dialogue, Bayero University, Kano
&
International Institute of Islamic Thought, (IIIT) Nigeria Office, Kano**

HELD AT

Bayero University, Kano

BETWEEN

13TH TO 15TH NOVEMBER, 2018

ABSTRACT

Islamic scholars are the guardians and transmitters of Islam and its doctrines. These shoulder responsibilities on the scholars, which include among others; keeping the correct narrative of Islamic doctrines and its interpretation as well as its transmission to successive generation without compromising its narration. The rise of Boko Haram (BH) and its ideology with a narrative contrary to the established Islamic principles and ideology challenges the scholars to counter-narrate the BH. Thus, the objective of this paper is to examine the role of Islamic scholars in counter-narrating the BH ideological bases based on the established Islamic doctrines. The paper shall rely on *Al-Qur'an*, *Al-Sunnah*, *Al-Ijma'*, *Al-Qiyas* and other sources of Islamic jurisprudence. Examination shall be extended to various sermons, preaching and lectures delivered by Islamic scholars. Statements and newspapers' reports on BH as well as video clips and statements issued by BH shall also be evaluated. The paper concludes that Islamic scholars are firmed in counter-narrating the BH though, with little support from the government, particularly at the early stage of its rise. It recommends that government need to involve Islamic scholars in the fight against BH by applying stick and carrot methodology.

INTRODUCTION

Boko Haram (BH) is a violent group that emerged in Nigeria and spread to the entire Lake Chad region (Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroun). The violence caused the death of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians which include women and children and loss of wealth in billions of Naira in addition to mass displacement of people in the region. The violent acts of the group have triggered further humanitarian crises with extensive social consequences (A Group of Scholars, 2017). Although this has been the trend of human behaviour and existence which could not be devoid of religious, ethnic, political and economic drives.

The group raised its violent acts against the Nigerian government after alleging that its members have been denied the right to practice their faith and that they are persecuted and massacred by security forces. The conflict continued to expand since then; the group started attacking Muslims and Christians in schools, markets, mosques, churches and the likes through assassinations, suicide bombings and other means of guerrilla warfare (Yelwa, 2018). The group justifies its heinous actions and ideologies with narrations from the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*. However, the group makes its narratives out of context and contrary to the interpretations and understandings of the established consensus of the mainstream jurists of Islamic jurisprudence.

Islam legalized all good things and forbade all bad things (Qur'an, 7:157). Bad things here include violence against innocent people and damaging or confiscating their properties. Muslim Jurists have unanimously agreed that the *Sharī'ah* has come to protect five fundamentals (*al-Darūriyyāt al-Khams*) which are religion, life, mind, progeny and wealth (A Group of Scholars, 2017). However, the actions of the group go against these five fundamentals of *Shari'ah*.

Islam is a religion and system of life that is based on doctrines that are derived from *Al-Qur'an* and *Al-Sunnah* and other accepted sources of Islamic jurisprudence. Islamic scholars narrate and interpret the doctrines in accordance with the established principles of Islam as provided by the sources. Scholars are the guardians and transmitters of Islamic principles (*Shari'ah*). This entrust them with the responsibility of keeping the correct narrative of Islamic doctrines and its interpretation as well as its transmission to successive generations without compromising its narration.

The rise of BH and its ideology with a narrative contrary to the established Islamic principles and ideology challenges the scholars to counter-narrate the BH. Thus, the objective of this

paper is to examine the role of Islamic scholars in counter-narrating the BH ideological bases in line with the established Islamic doctrines. The paper extends its Examination to sermons, preaching, lectures, writings by Islamic scholars and analysts in the area. Statements and newspapers' reports on BH as well as video clips and statements issued by BH shall also be evaluated.

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF BH

The origin of *Boko Haram* is difficult to establish. The arguments postulated by the analysts are clouded with uncertainties in the several views presented to arrive at possible reasons for its emergence into the public scene (Agence Francaise De Development [AFD], 2018: A Group of Scholars, 2017). However, the development of the group and its ideology from Nigerian *Taliban* to *Yusufiyyah* and then to BH was made by its slain leader, Muhammad Yusuf. Shekau, who assumed leadership of the group after Yusuf, tries to justify their violent actions on the norms of the group as laid by its slain leader, Muhammad Yusuf.

The arguments that tilt toward conspiracy theory (Asfura-Heim & McQuaid, 2015) state that *Boko Haram* drew its origin from various contemporary *Jihādi* movements set up by some radical persons calling for international Jihādism in the name of forming Islamic states. These veiled persons could be ignorantly enthusiastic Muslims or non-Muslims (A Group of Scholars, 2017). Some argued that BH is a political tool deliberately created through the traditional local education system to manipulate religious beliefs in order to pull off their political goals and that quest for oil wells in Northern Nigeria should not be ruled out (A Group of Scholars, 2017). Others see it as a process to restore the Islamic Caliphate of Kanem Borno since members of the group are mainly from the *kanuri* ethnic circle (AFD, 2018). Whereas some link the genesis to *Maitatsine* uprisings and that both *Maitasine* and BH were clandestine makings of some non-Muslims to tarnish the image of Islam (Ojobi, 2014).

On the Yusuf's experience and influence, A Group of Scholars (2017: 10) state;

Muhammad Yusuf had conflicting experiences in his life. He grew up in a family that practised *Tijjaniyyah Sect*. He met Ibrahim El-Zakzaky of Zaria in the early 1990s in Kaduna State. Although he was not a student of a Tertiary Institution, .. El-Zakzaky with whom Yusuf was influenced. El-Zakzaky later declared *Shism* as his movement religion in 1994. Thereafter, some of his followers broke away and formed *Jama'at Tajdid al-Islam* (Movement for the Revival of Islam, JTI).. In its first years, the group sturdily opposed El-Zakzaky and *Shism* ..Muhammad Yusuf joined the JTI and later became its caretaker leader in Borno State. He later joined the *Salafiyyah* movement and continued his Islamic Studies with its scholars. Along with some like-minded enthusiastic youth, he formed the *Shabab*

movement to continue with his vision for societal change. This formed the nucleus of a new movement.

He actively participated therein and got a wider recognition. When he started issuing bizarre and blood curdling *fatwa* on prohibition of schooling and partaking in government services among other controversial subjects such as *takfir* of Muslims, the *Salafiyyah* Scholars immediately and utterly denounced his views and explained that such views are one and the same as *Khawārij* viewpoints. At that point several members of *al-Shabab* left him and returned to the mainstream *Salafiyyah* Muslims.

However, Yusuf contact with El-Zakazy endowed him with some experiences and exposures while *Shabab* movement got him a wider recognition. These are the backdrop of his influence and exposure otherwise his educational background and connections shows nothing of him; Young Yusuf attended *Sangaya*, a traditional system of education for memorisation of *Qur'an*. He was neither enrolled into the conventional system of education nor did he study in formal higher Islamic education, locally or abroad. He has however studied and attended lessons of some home-based scholars. His commitment and hard work were highly admired by people and had made him attractive to his fellow students and teachers (A Group of Scholars, 2017).

Upon examination of Muhammad Yusuf background, one can safely conclude that, Yusuf has gone through a mix of experiences in various stages of his evolution. He went through conflicting experiences; ranging from early training and upbringing in a *Tijjaniyyah* circle, encounter with *shi'a* movement that endowed him antigovernment propaganda, intermingle with *Salafis* and finally ended up creating a movement that became an extremist and militant group (A Group of Scholars, 2017).

A lot of arguments were postulated as the reason behind the spread and development of the group and its ideology. The arguments were mainly replicated on religious, political and economic reasons. It is worthy to represent some of the arguments here;

Group of Scholars (2017) argued that Ignorance of religious precepts among the youths who are enthusiastic in accepting religious ideas as well as government nonchalant attitude toward religion have contributed to the development of the group and its ideology. This can be seen from some of the unit commanders (*Amir*) of the group who could not recite chapters of *Qur'an*.¹ The gap that exists between the established scholars and the youth also aggravated the phenomenon. The group took advantage of the gap and pay specific attention on youths and women by making special sessions for them (A Group of Scholars, 2017: Da'wah Institute of Nigeria [DIN], 2017). The failure of the government schools has also contributed to the development of the group (AFD, 2018).

¹ This type of videos could be accessed in You Tube, Such as 'Captured Boko Haram Leader can't Pray or Read *Qur'an*'.

Some argued from economic point of view that BH was driven by grievances resulting from decades of poor governance, elite delinquency, extreme economic inequality in the region, corruption in the government cadres and unemployment (Asfura-Heim & McQuaid, 2015; AFD, 2018). The twenty two (22) BH members arrested by the Nigerian Police admitted during interrogation that poverty and lack of employment drive them to accept the job offered to them by BH, although, they firmly know that the job is illegal but they were coerced by poverty (Vanguard, 2018).

AFD (2018) further argued that the conspiracy theories also gave rise to a significant paradox of the conflict. It based the argument on the fact that the authorities, which include army and politicians, were suspected of seeking to prolong the conflict for their own profit. For instance, increase in arms expenditure, with overcharged contracts. In Niger, for instance, the population moreover suspected the government of ordering the evacuation of the Yobe River banks and then the Lake Chad islands in 2015 to free up agricultural land for a foreign company. The populace have revealed an immense distrust of the political authority (AFD, 2018).

The following lines are attributes of the rationale behind the group continuous spread and expansion. The argument coincides with reasons advance above. AFD (2017: 117) states;

Climate change is hardly a convincing explanation for the conflict, no more than is the theory of Salafist indoctrination, which has played a very marginal role in the ongoing hostilities. Nor is it an ethnic liberation front, although the majority of Boko Haram are Kanuri speakers. Given the immense poverty in the area, it is worth looking instead into the social and political conditions behind the group's emergence and radicalisation. Corruption, state dysfunctions, a brutal military crackdown, and the suffering it has caused to the civilian population are key factors behind the insurgency and its continuation.

The above lines raised a strong argument on factors behind the conflict and its continuation. It clinched on political and social grounds than religious or ethnic inclination. The factors which include; corruption, poverty, state dysfunctions, a brutal military crackdown, and the suffering are key drivers behind the BH insurgency and its continuation. This piece of quotation has advanced panacea to the problem which is a u-turn in state dysfunctions' narration to establish corrupt free system and alleviate suffering. The religious counter-narrative against BH ideological bases is secondary.

CHARACTERISTICS AND IDEOLOGY OF BH

The characteristics of BH Narratives are not different from other extremist groups; the principal among which is that there are no scholars of resonance reputation among them. This characteristic in turn affects the validity of their judgements and ideologies (A Group of Scholars, 2017). The group is independent in its analogy of proffering solutions to issues and employs self originated method to arrive at misguided solutions than the established mainstream method.

According to DIN (2017), Yelwa (2017) and a Group of Scholars (2017) the attributes of the group also include; selection of textual evidences from the Glorious *Qur'an* and *Hadith* out of context without considering other textual evidences contradicting their conceptions and perceptions; unilateral interpretations without recourse to interpretations of renowned Islamic scholars; disregard to the Objectives of Shari'ah (*Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*) and its implications while passing judgement on emerging facts and cases; selection from *fatwa* (legal verdict) of scholars of portions that fit the group ideologies neglecting portions or *fatwa* that do not go along with its desires; accusation against renowned scholars views of being insincere and consequently question the authority and validity of their *fatwa* (DIN, 2017; Yelwa, 2017; A Group of Scholars, 2017; Allemaw, 2014).

A Group of Scholars (2017) counter the characteristics of the group that contradict the mainstream view. Narration should be based on the normative position of Muslim jurists supported with the principles adopted by the righteous predecessors; reference must be made to the methodology as well as the rules and principles established by the righteous predecessors in understanding Islam. A times reference had to be made to classic Arabic because the *Qur'an* was revealed in the same language. When it comes to *ijtihad* regard is given to universal implications of terms rather than their specificity or specific causes for the revelation of texts (A Group of Scholars, 2017; DIN, 2017)

The ideology of the group revolves and develops around their characteristics. The group ideology include; *takfir* (declaring one who does not share their ideology as Infidel); teaching against conventional education system; *jihad* and establishment of caliphate; *hijra* and serving under a non-Islamic government² (A Group of Scholars, 2017; Yelwa, 2017; Allemaw, 2014; DIN, 2017; AFD, 2017; Yusuf, 2008).

2 The task of this paper is not to counter the BH narration but to examine the role of scholars in doing so. Therefore, the reader may refer to some write-ups by Islamic scholars on BH narration and its counter. Some of the books were detailed in the analyses of the BH narration and the mainstream Islamic scholar's narration. The books include; A Group of Scholars (2017). *Moderation in Dialogue: An Alternative Narrative from Borno*. Maiduguri: A Group of Scholars; Da'wah Institute of Nigeria (DIN) (2017). *IS BOKO HARAM? Responses to 35 Common Religious Arguments against Conventional "Western" Education*. Minna: DIN; Yelwa, M.I. et'al (2018). *A Critical Discourse of BH's Ideology, Narratives and References* (Unpublished).

METHODOLOGY OF BH's NARATION

The group adopted religious and non religious method in propagating its ideology and in recruitment of members. In its religious method the group took advantage of ignorance of religious precepts within people and established a religious complex (*Markaz*) that included a mosque and a school where poor families could enrol their children. It established a “state within a state,” with a cabinet, its own religious police with certain identifiable dresses, and a large farm for food production (Asfura-Heim & McQuaid, 2015; A Group of Scholars). Lack of attention and disregard to Islamic traditional system of education was also used by the group (A Group of Scholars, 2017; DIN, 2017) in developing its ideology especially on women and youths by creating special preaching sessions for them and creating barricades between Islamic scholars/government and the populace, in ways that easily persuade and drag them into its ideology (A Group of Scholars, 2017).

The group cites texts from *Qur'an* and *Hadith* out of their true contexts thereby taking the texts beyond their original intended purpose (DIN, 2017). The group also rely on selected textual evidences in particular incidents without considering other textual evidences in relation to the issue thereby unilaterally interpreting textual provisions that contradict the interpretations of renowned Islamic scholars and thus misguidedly apply same decrees declared there from to novel incidents which are contrary to the objectives of *Shari'ah* to suit the group desires and interests (A Group of Scholars, 2017).

Because of prevalence of poverty and unemployment among the youths, the group adopted social welfare programmes through which it attracted several poor and helpless youth. Capital was given to petty traders to takeoff businesses and also marriages were arranged and sponsored in respect of the poor ones (A Group of Scholars, 2017).

Radical approach and political propaganda method was also used to develop the group and its ideology. The group emphasises on social problem and corruption in government in its sermons and preaching. The bold condemnation of the government and leaders was, therefore, very appealing to the majority of the populace who even though did not support the group, were nonetheless indifferent (A Group of Scholars, 2017).

THE EFFORT OF ISLAMIC SCHOLARS IN COUNTERING THE BH NARRATIVE

Islamic scholars and particularly, the *Salafi* scholars, as attested by observers, were unanimous in countering the BH narrative at the early stage of its development. The unanimous denunciation of Yusuf's views by *Salafi* scholars has turned the group hostile against them. Thus, the group became at logger head with *Salafis*. Subsequently, exchange of

views between the group and the *Salafiyyah* scholars in their preaching and Friday Sermons became a public scene (A Group of Scholars, 2017). The *Salafi* scholars in their effort of countering the BH narrative made radio and television programmes that were aired in Borno media stations. The *Salafi* narrations include; delivering sermons and preaching; engaging in ideological debate with the group; writing books and pamphlets. To mention a few; lectures by Sheikh Ja'afar; Dr Sani; lectures by Mallam Bashir; radio programme under the leadership of Mallam Yusuf Alhaji Inuwa Kwaribi; debate between Pantami and the BH slain leader, Muhammad Yusuf; Sheikh Dr Ibrahim Jalo writes in Arabic titled *ithaf al ahibbatu al amjaad*; Dr Mansur Isa Yelwa et'al write both Arabic and English title, such as *Jihad against Extremism and Violence: Alternative to Boko Haram Discourse*. Others include; *Islam and Contemporary World System* by Baba Gana Mustapha and Barrister Ahmad Abdulqadir; *Akidun Boko Haram a bisa Ma'aunin Ahlussunnah* by Allemawy.

The above facts raise a question that needs answer. The question is how the BH narration develops despite the efforts of Islamic scholars in counter-narrative and military crackdown. The answer may be more convincing when given from the political and social point of view. The radical condemnation of government corruption and poverty in the populace and the social welfare package introduced by the group are indeed good enticement for recruitment. Such is very appealing to the majority of the populace who even though did not support the group, were nonetheless indifferent. The government nonchalant attitude toward religious institution has also aggravated the scenario.

THE WAY FORWARD

Is good to start here by saying that corruption is the first enemy of peace, there can be no peaceful and harmonious coexistence in a state while it is tainted and full of corruption. Therefore, corruption should be declared as the first enemy and to be shun by all and sundry. Avoiding corruption and creating jobs and employment to the teeming population builds confidence and trust on the state by its citizenry. Upon achieving this, ideological counter may follow as secondary.

Nonchalant attitude and disregard to religious institution should be revisited by government. Islamic traditional education system, such as *Sangaya* and *Almajiri* system should be reformed and be incorporated into the education curriculum. The large number of *Sangaya/Almajiri* recruit into the BH can also attributed to the government neglect of the system.

The military crackdown against the group could curtail the crises but could not change the group ideology unless married with ideological crack down. This can be executed by adopting stick and carrot method. Government should also pursue ideological fight against the BH via counter-narrative by the mainstream Islamic scholars in addition to the military embarked upon by the government. The sole stick method may end the hostility but ideological warfare is the method that can counter the extremists' ideology. Therefore, the two methods must converge and be piloted by the government if it wants to win the war.

The recent reform in the National Board for Arabic and Islamic Studies (NBAIS) as National Examination and Regulatory Body that covers the whole nation is a welcome development (National Board for Arabic and Islamic Studies [NBAIS], 2011). The function of the board include integrating Arabic and Islamic curricula as well as responding to the demand of Nigerian Communities in developing religious discipline; collaboration with state Ministries of Education in recognition and coordination of Arabic and Islamic Schools; review of Syllabi for Arabic and Islamic schools and Colleges, conduct of examinations for Junior and Senior Arabic and Islamic Schools Certificate, standardization of examination for the award of certificates for Arabic and Islamic Schools and Colleges and advise Federal and State Ministries of Education on policies concerning Arabic and Islamic Education (NBAIS, 2011). However, the reform that expands the powers of NBAIS to cover the whole country is not enough. The reform need to include the long existing traditional system of Islamic education and *Sangaya*. NBAIS should have the inventory of all *Sangaya* schools, although, this may require states' government participation. The reform should incorporate *Sangaya* into the mainstream education system by designing curriculum and providing classrooms, accommodation and feeding to the students and the teachers be included into the state payroll.

Fiqh Academy and *Fatwa* board should be established to regulate *Fatwa* and the qualification of persons to issue *Fatwa*. Sermons, lectures, preaching and other religious activities should be supervised and regulated. The board may introduce licensing of persons who qualify to issue *Fatwa*. The board should reserve certain category of *Fatwa* to itself, such as issues that concern the community (*Ummah*) as a whole. These include issuing *Fatwa* on state affairs, leadership, education and the likes. Others that may be left to scholars at individual capacities to issue *Fatwa* may include *Ibadaat* (like prayers, fasting etc) and matters of personal status. The rationale behind this categorisation is to reserve issues of the *Ummah* to go through thorough analyses of many scholars (*Ijtihad Jama'ee*) and to have at least a consensus within

the board. However, dissenting views may as well be expressed. The board should be constituted by knowledgeable, highly skilled, conversant and God fearing scholars. The *Fatwa* issued by the board may have the force of law or at best the executive flavour. This will go a long way in curtailing the circulation of unlettered and unlearned person's *Fatwa* and narration in the public domain. The board should also establish a programme for training and retraining of *Du'aat* to develop their capacity in religious and nonreligious issues.

Government should ensure enrolment of children to schools. Investigation has shown low level of enrolment in some quarters, particularly in primary and secondary schools (AFD, 2018). Low level of schools' enrolment plus poverty and unemployment may lead to idleness. *An idle man is devil's workshop*. Enrolment of children into school prevents them from being potential recruits of insurgents and all sort of illegal and unlawful associations. Full enrolment can only be achieved via revival of public schools. Present state of public schools cannot accommodate the desired percentage (AFD, 2018). The enrolment is far below the required number and the schools are not in good shapes. The classrooms were overstretched; number of schools is that of the 1980s but partially renovated. Some of the schools destroyed by BH were not rebuild; low number of teachers (AFD, 2018). These problems pressed some parents to enrol their children into private schools. The substantial fraction of parents cannot afford enrolment of their children into the private schools. This has also created a vacuum that BH's narration penetrates and recruited substantial number of the children that were not enrolled into school.³ The panacea to this is revival of public schools and creation of jobs and employment.

CONCLUSION

The rise of BH's narration contrary to the established Islamic principles and ideology challenges the Islamic scholars to counter-narrate the BH ideological bases. Islamic scholars were unanimous in their counter-narrative against the BH and in doing so, the scholars deliver lectures, sermons, and organise radio programmes. Some even write books in many languages that include; Hausa, Arabic and English. However, the BH narrative continues to develop despite military crackdown and the effort of the Islamic scholars' counter-narrative against it. The two parallel methods of warfare against the BH that were separately adopted; one piloted by the government through military crackdown and ideological warfare piloted by Islamic scholars at their individual capacity on the other hand in addition to suffering caused

³ During the period of State of Emergency in the North-Eastern States, Borno State closed down schools for almost two years and camped the internally displaced persons (IDP's) in the schools.

by social and economic problem because of state dysfunctions and corruption have paved ways for the continuance of the crises.

Therefore, this paper makes the following recommendations;

- a. Social and economic policies should be revisited to alleviate poverty and suffering of people. Corruption and state dysfunctions should be put on reverse gear. This will create trust and confidence of the populace on the government.
- b. Government should be active in religious matters and its nonchalant attitude toward religion should be avoided. Government should regulate and supervise *fatwa* by establishing a statutory body to regulate same. Training and retraining programme should be established for *Da'wa* scholars to develop their capacity in religious and nonreligious matters.
- c. *Sangaya* and traditional Islamic education should be incorporated into the mainstream education curriculum. Certificate should be issued to the products of the system. The certificate should be acceptable to modern educational institutions and the government ministries and parastatals.
- d. Public schools should be revived and more schools should be opened in urban and rural centres for enrolment of children into the schools to save them from being potential recruit of social menace.
- e. Counter-narrative against BH should adopt both the stick and the carrot approach of military and ideological warfare to bring an end to both the ideology and the violence.

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